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**A FORGOTTEN CHAPLAIN
OF THE CIVIL WAR:
COMMANDER JOHN L. LENHART**



U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph

COMMANDER JOHN L. LENHART
1805-1862
Chaplain, USN

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It was Saturday, March 8, 1862. The glare of midday disclosed a strange sight on the Elizabeth River. The Confederate "ironclad" the *Merrimac*, attended by her court, the steamers *Patrick Henry*, *Jamestown*, *Teases*, *Beaufort*, and *Raleigh*, was making a grand debut. This ugly lady of the sea would win no prize for beauty, but at that moment in sheer destructive power she had no equal. Buchanan, the flag officer, was taking her into an engagement, the Battle of Hampton Roads, that would, on Sunday, March 9, change the character of modern naval warfare.¹ An editorial in the *New York Times*, March 16, 1862, caught the significance of this battle which culminated in the confrontation between the *Merrimac* and the Union *Monitor*:

To the world at large it (the battle) possesses vastly greater interests. On that eventful Sunday the whole naval architecture and harbor defenses of the world were summarily changed. Henceforth, the mighty frigates and steamers, the "wooden walls" which have formed the marine defense of nations, are nothing. They have passed away as the crossbow did before the musket.²

The participants in this fateful engagement were all assembled on Saturday. Eastward from Fortress Monroe, the Union steam frigates the *Minnesota* and the *Roanoke*, the sailing frigate *St. Lawrence*, and several gunboats awaited the *Merrimac*. Westward near Newport News, the sailing frigate *Congress* and the sailing sloop *Cumberland* rode at anchor. The old 40-gun frigate *Cumberland*, built in 1825, served as the flagship of the Home Squadron. She was destined to be the first to prove the squat, iron lady's destructiveness. This was by design, for Buchanan wanted to prove the *Merrimac*'s armor against the *Cumberland*'s formidable guns, especially her 70-pound rifles. On the morning of Saturday, March 8, the two great ships met in an engagement that marked the beginning of the Battle of Hampton Roads. A few weeks after the battle, a romanticized narrative poem, written by the Rev. L. W. Peck of New Jersey, described the engagement. Peck's poem, "The Song of The Monitor," may be the only literary tribute to the event. His words set the scene:

The morn had dawned serenely, the earth
was bright and fair.
And scarce a hostile murmur perplexed the
tranquil air;
The fleet were all at anchor along the
quiet bay,
Like wild birds of the ocean, that rested
from their play.
The mist that veiled (sic) the distance was
lifted toward the sky,
And, like a dreamer's vision, in fragments
floated by:³

An eyewitness account reported that: "As soon as the *Merrimac* came in range of the *Cumberland* the latter opened on her with her heavy guns, but the balls struck and glanced off, having no more effect than peas from a popgun." Peck in his poem graphically depicts the *Merrimac* as "the daring stranger" that "comes with raging breath."

That this engagement with the *Cumberland* and the *Congress* was a lopsided victory for the Confederate *Merrimac*, is widely known. The *Merrimac*'s horrible effectiveness, soon to be surpassed by the *Monitor* in the next day's encounter, has been logged in every history of the Civil War.

But more than timber and sails were rent that day in proving the *Merrimac*'s power. Human lives were spent. Out of a complement of 376 officers and men on the *Cumberland*, 121 were killed or drowned. But the heroisms of that day have been forgotten.

The story of Chaplain Lenhart, the first naval chaplain in American history to lose his life in battle, has not even survived as a footnote in the historical accounts of that day.

When the *Cumberland*, severely damaged and taking on water through the gaping hole in her bow, began to sink, Lt. Commander John L. Lenhart of New Jersey, Chaplain of the *Cumberland*, elected to stay with his men, and go down with the ship.⁴ No other naval chaplain would die in battle until December 7, 1941, when Chaplains Thomas L. Kirkpatrick and Aloysius H. Schmitt were killed aboard the *Arizona* and the *Oklahoma* at Pearl Harbor.⁵ The Battle of Hampton Roads has attracted considerable attention because it marked the demise of the wooden ships. But Chaplain Lenhart's sacrifice remains little known.

Surprisingly, the newspaper accounts of the period made little note of his death. This is puzzling, for his death would have afforded an opportunity for columnists and political cartoonists like Thomas Nast to glorify his sacrifice in the cause of the Union. One newspaper, the *Independent*, for March 20, 1862, reported that "... her chaplain went down with her. He was at his post with the surgeons, among the wounded, and none of the surgeons or the chaplain forsook their men, but went to God with them! This was a glorious immersion! This baptism cleansed life once and forever!" But then in plaintive appeal, the paper asks: "We do not know the chaplain's name. Will someone inform us? It is known in heaven."⁶ Subsequent issues of that paper said no more of the event even after Lenhart's name became known. He had become a statistic in the records of the battle; his heroism all but forgotten. The only tangible memorial to Lenhart seems to be the Lenhart Oratory, which is a part of the larger Royce Chapel at the Naval Training Center at Sampson, New York.⁷

Who was this man who stepped for a moment on the stage of history and then disappeared as the curtain fell on the carnage at Hampton Roads? What, in his background, prepared him for the strength and devotion of his final sacrifice?

John L. Lenhart was a Methodist Episcopal clergyman, a member of the Newark Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. He was born in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania on October 29, 1805, and was ordained in 1830

in Philadelphia. Lenhart spent seventeen years in local pastorates. His first church was in lower Philadelphia in what was called the Neck Mission. From 1831 to 1834 he served churches in the Caroline and Cambridge circuits in Maryland. During that period he apparently met and married his wife, for the census of 1840 lists Maryland as her birthplace. There is no record of children.

After his pastorates in Pennsylvania and Maryland, he moved to New Jersey in 1835, and served in Flemington, 1835; Long Branch, 1836-37; Mount Holly, 1838-39; Bridgeton, 1840-41; Camden, 1842; Franklin Street, Newark, 1843-44; and Cross Street, Paterson, 1845-46.⁸ Then, in 1847, he received his appointment as chaplain from the Secretary of the Navy.⁹

Lenhart was obviously a man of considerable energy and compassion. He was remembered in Flemington as a person of "considerable popular talent," who achieved "great results along evangelistic lines." While at Mt. Holly, he led the people in building and dedicating a new church. Some of his colleagues knew him to be an impulsive man, "an impulsiveness which developed itself in generous deeds."¹⁰

His willingness to spend himself in causes that aroused his compassion may account for his far-reaching influence, and one who was touched by Lenhart's ideals was Uriah S. Stevens, the founder of the Knights of Labor, forerunner of the American labor movement. Stevens and other garment workers founded the Knights of Labor, a secret League, in Philadelphia in December, 1869, seven years after Lenhart's death. But in naming John L. Lenhart as one of his teachers and sympathizers, he indicated the impact of Lenhart's own concern for the plight of the worker.¹¹

Lenhart knew the problems of the worker at first hand. He served, for example, as minister of the Cross Street Methodist Episcopal Church in Paterson, New Jersey. The church had a large membership and was considered to be "the beehive of Methodism" in that area.¹² But the demands in that industrial city were taxing and his health failed. He struggled with a serious throat infection which threatened to end his professional career, and force him, as he told a friend, "to be laid upon the shelf." But such a future was out of character for him. An alternative ministry as a naval chaplain seemed to offer the answer. It was at this time, February 27, 1847, that he sought and received an appointment from the Secretary of the Navy, and signed his oath on March 15 of that year. His appointment came just in time to preserve his sense of usefulness.¹³

Lenhart served as chaplain for fifteen years, until the fateful afternoon of March 8, 1862. These years were full and worthwhile. Through periods of shore and sea duty, he made the most of his days.

He experienced frustrations, however. There was a delay in his first assignment that seems to have caused him distress. In a letter to the Secretary of the Navy, July 2, 1847, written from Paterson, he pleaded: "Since my appointment as chaplain in the Navy, I have relinquished my charge (church), and am now without any special appointment which to me is almost intolerable. If, Sir, you can, consistent with your arrangements, order me to the 'Frigate Brandywine,' or any other, you will oblige (me). . ." Lenhart's plea

was heard, for on August 5, he reported to Commodore Kearney in Norfolk on board the *Brandywine*.¹⁴

A few years later, in March, 1851, Lenhart was assigned to the New York Navy Yard and to duty on the Receiving Ship, *North Carolina*. One suspects that he found shore duty rather undemanding, for he sought special permission "to reside in Newark, New Jersey," and commute to the ship as needed. This was denied, however, and he remained with the *North Carolina* until 1858.¹⁵

One of Lenhart's greatest frustrations occurred in 1859 when he received orders to report for duty on board the *U.S.S. Constellation*. This promised to be a great adventure, for the *Constellation* was assigned to the African Squadron, a squadron which hunted out slave ships off the African continent. Actually, before that voyage was done, seven slave ships were captured off the west coast of Africa. Lenhart's humanitarianism would have been deeply satisfied by participation in such a mission. Although the records indicate that he was on that voyage, some letters, recently discovered in his correspondence with the Secretary of the Navy, reveal that he was not. Lenhart's wife was terminally ill with breast cancer, and he asked for permission "to remain with her in Newark in her affliction." Permission was granted. But his desire to be on board the *Constellation* is revealed in his response: "At any subsequent period after the above difficulties are removed, I will, at my own expense and your order, join the ship to which I am ordered."¹⁶

By July, 1860, Lenhart's wife was dead, and he pleaded for orders to join the *Constellation*. But a letter from the Secretary of the Navy closed the door. According to this letter, the cruise of the *Constellation* was "more than half completed," and, it seemed, "not expedient to order (Lenhart) to the African Station."¹⁷

By September 16, 1860, the fateful orders came directing Lenhart to "proceed to Portsmouth, New Hampshire by the 17th October next, and to report to Capt. Pearson on that day, for duty on board the U.S. Sloop of War *Cumberland*".¹⁸ At that time there were twenty-four chaplains in the U.S. Navy, but Lenhart was the only one assigned to U.S. waters. His assignment to this flagship of the Home Squadron would, in a little more than a year, project him into one of the towering moments of naval history.

On the fifteenth anniversary of his first naval appointment, March 1, seven days before the battle, he wrote a prophetic letter to a friend, J. M. Tuttle, in New Jersey. Almost as if he sensed the nearness of death, he voiced his religious philosophy and faith, and his confidence in eternal life. The pangs of loneliness touched him as they did so many in Service, for he wrote: "I did not know but you had quite forgotten your old friend in the midst of perils and dangers, while you were surrounded with friends and enjoying the comforts of home. It seems, however, that you have had to share in the sorrows of those that mourn."¹⁹

Poor health had plagued him since the first of the year, and he wrote he had been "more than ordinarily afflicted . . . with diarrhea, then with chills and fever, and now I am suffering with neuralgia of the head." The doctor

forbade him to read or write. And yet he goes on at length expressing his views of the war and the central political issues.

We certainly have reason for rejoicing at the recent victories won by our arms. Yet . . . I fear many lives will be lost and much blood shed before rebellion will be fairly subjugated. The Southerners will not yield as readily as some imagine, especially while those fanatical abolitionists are putting forth efforts to carry their unconstitutional programs. I have no more sympathy for the ultra abolitionists than I have for the Southern fire-eater. I go for the Constitution just as it is, no amendments, no tampering whatever.²⁰

In those days before the battle, Lenhart was obviously feeling the weight of events. In his letter he speaks of "the difference between cruising on board a man-of-war in times of peace and in war times. Now constant vigilance and activity are necessary, many sleepless nights, and many anxious hours pass away, not knowing what hour we may be called into action, to kill or to be killed."²¹

Lenhart's letter also reveals that intelligence about the pending battle was known. A dispatch from Gen. Wood, received several days before March 1, confirmed that attack was imminent. Intelligence reported that the strategy for a Confederate attack was also known. The *Merrimac*, situated at Norfolk, and gunboats, above on the James River, were to attack the *Cumberland* and the *Congress*. Gen. Magruder's army was to attack Camp Butler at Newport News. Lenhart wrote with emotion: "We felt we were ready for them, and I am not sure but a goodly number of us felt desirous to have them come on. I think before this month ends you will hear stirring news from this quarter."²²

Of course, Lenhart was right. Stirring news would come. For the battle was erupting according to plan and place.

Lenhart watched as the *Merrimac* bore down on the *Cumberland*. He had just celebrated the fifteenth anniversary of his appointment as a naval chaplain. For one who was anxious that his life always be useful, he may have had no idea how useful his life would finally be in caring for his mates that afternoon.

J. B. Smith, the pilot on board the *Cumberland*, reported the scene to the *New York World*:

About eleven o'clock, a dark looking object was described coming around Craney Island through Norfolk Channel, and proceeding straight in our direction. It was instantly recognized as the *Merrimac*. We had been on the lookout for her for sometime . . . As she came ploughing through the water right onwards toward our port bow, she looked like a huge half-submerged crocodile. Her sides seemed of solid iron, except where the guns pointed from the narrow ports, and rose slantingly from the water, like the roof of a house or the arched back of a tortoise . . . At her prow I could see the iron ram projecting, straight forwards, somewhat above the water's edge, and apparently a mass of iron.²³

The *Cumberland*'s crew watched the *Merrimac* steaming across the sloop's bow to gain position for ramming. The old sloop was a sitting duck, her wooden hull and superstructure totally vulnerable to the *Merrimac*'s fire-power and massive iron prow. Without power or armor, she awaited the attack. The crew had already beat to quarters, double breeched the guns, and cleared the ship for action. Unable to bring her own broadside guns to target,

the *Cumberland*'s only advantage was her courageous crew and the determination of the acting commander, Lt. George Morris.

Just after 1:00 PM, the *Cumberland*'s forward guns spoke first. Lenhart's ears rang from the deafening roar; his nostrils burned from the acrid smell of powder. As the *Merrimac*'s full fire thundered in reply, the carnage began to be apparent. Nine marines were killed or wounded in the first exchange. The second shot disabled a gun and its entire crew; only the powder-boy survived. Huge wooden splinters flew about the forward deck like so many jagged arrows striking men down on every side. Even as Lenhart looked, one gunner had both his legs shot away, yet he made three steps on his raw and bloody thighs, seized the lanyard, and fired his gun before falling back dead.²⁴ With a kind of courage born of an impulsive and compassionate nature, Lenhart moved about, bringing comfort to the smoke-grimed wounded and closing the eyes of the dead.

Fifteen minutes of fiery hell engulfed the *Cumberland*. Then, suddenly, she shivered in every timber. The *Merrimac* had smashed her fifteen-foot, iron ram into the *Cumberland*'s bow below the water line, crushing the planks and timbers. Peck in his poem refers to the devastating ram as the "prow of iron" that "makes a way for ocean above the wreck of lives." The speaker in the poem seems disturbed that the *Merrimac* is a United States vessel, now refurbished and manned by traitors. Peck writes:

It was our country's vessel that bore that
traitorous crew
And traitors laid her armor, and pinned it
through and through
And launched her on the billow with grim
and reckless pride.
That no ship could stand before her when her
full intent was tried.²⁵

The shock from the ramming was terrible, and the momentum made the topsail yards of the *Cumberland* touch the water. The *Merrimac*, after ramming, couldn't easily back off. The tidal current swung her stern almost broadside to the *Cumberland*, making her a target for the Federal guns.²⁶ Before the under-powered *Merrimac* could break free, Lenhart saw the gunners pour three broadsides into the ironclad.

The *New York World* reported: "Near the middle of the fight, when the berth deck of the *Cumberland* had sunk below water, one of the crew of the *Merrimac* came out of a port to the outside of her iron-plated roof, and a ball from one of the *Cumberland*'s guns instantly cut him in two. That was the last and only rebel that ventured within sight."²⁷

But now the *Cumberland* was at the *Merrimac*'s mercy. Buchanan's demand for surrender brought Lt. Morris' historic reply: "Never! We will sink with our colors flying."²⁸ Peck gives a poeticized version of the lieutenant's words:

But now our brave commander still stands
upon the deck,

And cries, 'My boys that monster we strove
in vain to check,
But shall we have a broadside to show,
my gallant Tars,
We go down yet unconquered beneath our
country's stars.'²⁹

The ironclad raked the *Cumberland* again with heavy fire. So water poured through the hole in her bow; efforts to bring her about were futile. She was already sinking. As the sloop settled forward, the casualties mounted. The sick bay, berth deck, and gun deck were almost literally covered with the killed and wounded. In the midst of the carnage and the pandemonium, the surgeons and the chaplain did all they could to aid the casualties.

After ramming the battered *Cumberland* once more, the *Merrimac* steamed triumphantly past her and headed up the James River. Because the *Cumberland* was sinking rapidly, Lt. Morris ordered officers to check the wounded and bring on deck those who might be saved.³⁰ All usable life boats were quickly filled. Some of the men sought to save themselves by swimming, while others on the lower deck jumped from the portholes. Many took refuge in the rigging. Working frantically, officers and crew lashed as many of the wounded as possible to racks and mess chests and set them adrift. The last one on deck was the gunner who went over the side. Although he shouted for Lenhart to follow, the chaplain in that last moment chose to remain with those who would never leave the ship. Peck pictures the scene and writes:

While shook the land and ocean beneath
the deafening sound,
Then stood the noble chaplain, a lion
heart was he,
Who long had made the Bible his life-chart
on the seas.³¹

Lenhart had come to feel an identification with the ship. Not long before the engagement, he had refused an appointment to a New York Hospital, saying: "I wish to see the end of her eventful cruise." He wrote a friend in Newark a few days before the battle: "It is just as near my heavenly home from the old *Cumberland* as from any other place." It proved to be so.

Two hours after the battle had begun, the *Cumberland* sank rapidly in shallow water. All but her masts were submerged. The American flag could still be seen on the gaff, whipping in the afternoon breeze, a silent tribute to those who went down with the ship. The flag apparently continued to fly for months after the battle. There is an undocumented story that Oliver Wendell Holmes saw the flag flying six months later and saluted it as a sign of victory even in defeat.

According to Commander H. Lawrence Martin, an historian in the Chaplains' Corps, there is no record that the *Cumberland* was raised or its wreckage examined. There is no record either that Lenhart's body was ever recovered. The only reference to a memorial service for him was a tribute offered by the Rev. J. S. Porter at the session of the Newark Annual

Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Newton, New Jersey, on April 5, 1862.

As time passed, the battle of Hampton Roads came to be remembered chiefly for the clash of the *Merrimac* and the *Monitor*. The victory of the *Merrimac* over the *Cumberland* simply proved the invincibility of ironclad ships against the "wooden walls." Speaking of the *Cumberland*, the *New York Times* observed, on March 10, 1862: "She was a leaky old affair, and her loss is by no means serious."

But the loss of 121 heroic men was serious, and needs to be remembered. The heroic action of Chaplain John L. Lenhart remains a sterling example of courage and dedication, and it foreshadows the spirit of all those chaplains who would follow. His simple declaration, written not long before his death, is a hallmark of all armed forces chaplains, regardless of creed. "My greatest desire," wrote Lenhart, "is to be a useful minister, so that whether on shore, or afloat, in peace or in war, I may do good to my fellowman."

The closing lines of J. L. Peck's, *Song of the Monitor*, strikes a sensitive note of remembrance:

All hail the worthy chaplain! Hail the
gallant Tars
Who went down, fighting bravely, beneath
their country's stars.
Proud fame no braver boasteth among
her noble dead;
Freedom shall on them ever increasing
glory shed.³²

END NOTES

1. George Ramsay Clark, *A Short History of the United States Navy* (Phil. and London, 1916), p. 20 ff.
2. *New York Times*, March 16, 1862.
3. *Christian Advocate and Journal*, April 10, 1862.
4. Vernon Boyce Hampton, ed., *Newark Conference Centennial History* (New York, 1957), pp. 366-368, Quoted in *Newark Daily Advertiser*, March 11, 1862.
5. H. Lawrence Martin, *A John L. Lenhart Biographical Statement* (Washington, D. C. Office of Chief of Chaplains, 1984), p. 23.
6. *The Independent*, March 20, 1862.
7. Martin, p. 23.
8. *Minutes of the New Jersey Annual Conference Methodist Episcopal Church*, April 26 - May 2, 1837, p. 17. *Minutes . . . 1838, 1839, 1840, 1842, 1843, 1844, 1845, 1846.*
9. *U.S. Naval Manuscript Records*, Entry 1225, General Services Administration.
10. *Minutes of the Newark Conference*, 1862, pp. 39, 40.
11. "Uriah Stevens," *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, 1897, Vol. 7, p. 262.
12. *Paterson Daily*, 1840-41.
13. *Officers Letters*, March 1847, No. 157. July 1847, No. 20. July 26, 1847, No. 186.
14. *Ibid.*, July 26, 1847, No. 186.
15. *Ibid.*, May 1851, No. 188.

16. Ibid., May 1851, No. 188. The U.S.S. *Constellation* is presently anchored in the inner harbor in Baltimore, Maryland. The ship is being renovated and is open to the public as a museum.
17. *Officers Letters*, Vol. 1, July 1860, No. 136. July 14, 1860, No. 166.
18. *Letters to Officers Ships of War*, No. 61, p. 292 Vol. 2, No. 51.
19. *The Christian Advocate*, May 8, 1862.
20. Ibid., May 8, 1862.
21. Ibid., May 8, 1862.
22. Ibid., May 8, 1862.
23. *The New York World*, March 11, 1862, p. 1.
24. *New York Times*, March 14, 1862.
25. *Christian Advocate and Journal*, April 10, 1862.
26. *New York Herald Tribune*, March 11, 1862.
27. *New York World*, March 11, 1862, p. 1.
28. *The Independent*, March 20, 1862.
29. *Christian Advocate and Journal*, April 10, 1862.
30. Woods and Rawson, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*. (Washington 1898) Vol. 7, pp. 20-23. *Newark Daily Advertiser*, March 16, and 22, 1862.
31. *Christian Advocate and Journal*, April 10, 1862.
32. Ibid., April 10, 1862.